

# Sui Yangdi

## Suí Yángdì 隋炀帝

569–618 CE *Emperor, Sui dynasty, reigned 604 to 618 CE, the “bad last ruler”*

**The reign of Sui Yangdi was marked by the building of canals, the construction of grand palaces, and extravagant entertaining. The expense associated with these achievements, along with huge loss of life and burdensome taxation of the populace in wars against Koguryô in modern-day Korea, resulted in widespread rebellion, Yangdi’s ultimate death, and the downfall of the Sui dynasty.**

**Y**ang Guang (569–618 CE) was the second son of Sui Wendi and the second and last emperor of the Sui dynasty (569–618 CE). His father ennobled him as the Prince of Jin at the age of thirteen. In 588, the emperor placed him nominally in charge of the land forces that vanquished the Southern Chen dynasty the following year. In 590, Wendi appointed him Governor-General of the southern province of Yangzhou with headquarters at Jiangdu (modern Yangzhou). Except for a brief stint as a commander of an army sent against the Turks and yearly visits to pay court in Daxing, Wendi’s capital, Yang Guang spent ten years in the post. He became an ardent admirer of southern culture during that period, even learning the Wu dialect of the territory under his administration. Unlike his father, who was anti-intellectual and anti-Confucian, Yang Guang patronized hundreds of Confucian scholars and southern literary men, inviting them to Jiangdu where they taught and wrote.

When the crown prince, Wendi’s eldest son, incurred

the extreme displeasure of Empress Dugu in 600, a cabal of officials including Yang Guang succeeded in unseating him. Wendi then installed Guang as his heir-apparent.

On 21 August 604, Yang Guang ascended the throne in Daxing, eight days after the demise of his father, whose death he probably engineered. In November, Yangdi left for Luoyang, which became the real seat of his court. Although there were very important political and economic factors in the emperor’s decision to shift his capital to Luoyang, he had a real aversion to Daxing and spent little time there. A geomancer had informed him that Daxing was a threat to him because metal (the element of the west) governed it whereas wood (the element of the east) governed his personal destiny (axes hew trees).

### Luoyang

Yangdi was not happy with the existing city of Luoyang, another capital built in the Han dynasty and rebuilt several times thereafter. In April 605, he ordered the construction of a new city to replace the older metropolis, assigning two million adult males to erect walls, grade roads, and raise buildings. On 11 April, Yangdi ordered over twenty thousand wealthy merchants and great traders to move their families into the capital in order to fill its markets. The city was completed in February 606, a mere 294 days after Yangdi issued the decree inaugurating the project.

The city, encompassing about 46 square kilometers and laid out in a grid pattern, included a palace, administrative compound, three markets, and 103 walled wards

for dwellings. Luoyang straddled the Luo River, so it had a distinct advantage over Daxing because transportation by water was easy and inexpensive. But it also had a terrible disadvantage because the river periodically flooded, heavily damaging homes and other structures.

West Park was among the most extravagant of Yangdi's expenditures at Luoyang. The wall of that pleasure garden was 70 kilometers in circumference. The palace was constructed of extraordinary timber and wonderful stones; rare flora and fauna filled its gardens. A large lake surrounded three man-made mountains, purportedly representing the fabled mountains of the immortals rumored to lie in the eastern ocean. Ingenious kiosks and observatories on the mountains, operated by hidden machinery, rose from and fell into the ground as if levitated by some divine magic.

Unlike his frugal father, Yangdi was profligate and spent large sums on building palaces, including the conversion of his former mansion at Jiangdu into an enormous and extravagant palace. The emperor raised at least seventy palaces at various sites in the provinces during his short reign of less than fourteen years.

## The Grand Canal

Yangdi is probably best known to history as a builder of the Grand Canal. The first branch replaced an older canal that linked the Huang (Yellow) River to the Yangzi (Chang) River. On 14 April 605, he ordered some 500,000 soldiers and laborers from Henan (the region south of Luoyang) to build a segment from the Huang River to the Huai River and 100,000 from the south to repair his father's canal from the Huai River to the Yangzi. Two broad roads, lined with elm and willow trees to provide shade, flanked the 119-meter-wide waterway, and twenty-six palaces erected along its course served as rest stops.

The second branch was a true innovation. On 23 January 608, Yangdi issued a command conscripting one million men from northern armies for the construction of a canal from the Huang River to a point between modern Beijing and Tianjin, a distance of about one thousand kilometers. When the number of adult males proved insufficient for the task, the emperor impressed women to fill the ranks. Completed in 609, its primary function was to provide transportation of provisions north for his campaign

to conquer Koguryô, in modern-day Korea. Early in 611, he ordered the construction of a third branch, again a replacement for an older canal, from the Yangzi to Hangzhou. The total length of the system was approximately 2,357 kilometers.

## The Imperial Flotilla

The renovation of the canals from the Huang River to the Yangzi served to improve the transportation of grain and silk revenues to the central government in the capitals, but the emperor also wanted an impressive waterway on which a flamboyant flotilla could carry him to Jiangdu. On 23 April 605, eight days after ordering the construction of the canals, he commissioned two of his mandarins to select timber for the construction of a fleet of twenty thousand vessels on the Yangzi. A quarter of the boats were built for the imperial flotilla. First and foremost among the vessels was the Dragon Barge: 13.5 meters high, 15 meters abeam, and 60 meters from stem to stern. It had a superstructure of four decks crowned by a main hall and two audience chambers. Eighteen hundred "hall legs" working in three shifts grasped six giant hawsers and towed the ship from the roadways on banks of the canal. The empress rode in the Circling Hornless Dragon barge, towed by nine hundred "hall legs." The remainder of the boats carried an assortment of passengers and their regalia: consorts, palace women, princes, princesses, capital officials, clergymen, foreign emissaries, as well as imperial guard units. When Yangdi sailed on the canal, he took his entire court and much of the central government's bureaucracy with him. The completed flotilla—5,245 vessels requiring a total of 45,930 haulers—arrived in Luoyang during September. It departed for its first voyage to Jiangdu on 2 October. In all, the flotilla sailed five times to and from Jiangdu during Yangdi's reign.

## Northern Tours

During the second phase of his reign Yangdi devoted the better part of his time to dealing with the Turks on China's northern borders. His strategy called for overawing them with China's cultural superiority by the display of clever contrivances. To that end, he personally conducted

tours in the north and northwest ostensibly to inspect the Great Wall. In 607, he ventured north of the Great Wall to Yulin, where the emperor feted the Turkish Qaghan Qimen (reigned 599–611) and his entourage in an enormous tent, large enough to accommodate the khan and 3,500 of his tribesmen. During the feast Chinese entertainers performed the hundred acts—acrobatics, wrestling, juggling, and the like—for the amusement of the guests. The Turks, who were duly startled but pleased, presented a huge number of cattle, sheep, horses, and camels to Yangdi. Yangdi reciprocated with gifts of silk and gold jars.

On his second tour in 608, Yangdi traveled north of the wall again and stopped at Wuyuan. The emperor brought with him a portable wooden fortress that was assembled

---

**Emperor Sui Yangdi. Detail from the painting *Portraits of the Emperors* by Yan Liben. Unlike his frugal father Wendi, Yangdi was a spendthrift; he commissioned the building of at least seventy palaces at various sites during his reign of less than fourteen years.**



on the spot. Its crenulated walls were 178 meters square and 12.46 meters high. When the imperial cortege encamped, spear chariots encircled the fort, and iron spikes were scattered on the ground inside the enclosed space to injure any horses that intruded. Rotating crossbows rigged with trip wires automatically fired at any trespassers. During his sojourn Yangdi ordered the construction of a city replete with dwellings, curtains, couches, and cushions for the Qaghan Qimin. The khan respected Chinese culture and was thinking of changing his barbarian customs, and Yangdi wanted to reward him.

Yangdi's third tour in 609 took him to the region of Lake Kokonor in the far northwest to inspect the new territories that one of his commanders had acquired from the Tuyuhun the preceding year. For the occasion a large touring car was constructed, its roof large enough to accommodate a unit of imperial guards numbering several hundred who stood watch there.

On 27 July, Yangdi boarded the car. As a sign of special favor he invited the King of Turfan and the Chieftain of Hami—both oasis states on the northern silk route—to ascend the hall and dine with him. Other legates from more than twenty foreign nations sat in the courtyard outside to eat. Court entertainers performed foreign and Chinese music for the amusement of the guests. Afterward the emperor bestowed gifts on everyone.

## The Korean Campaigns

During the third phase of his reign Yangdi was obsessed with defeating Koguryō, a state in present-day Liaoning Province and northern Korea, something his father had failed to achieve. Yangdi mounted a total of three campaigns against Koguryō. In preparation for the first campaign, he ordered the construction of a maritime fleet of three hundred warships, called up thirty thousand crossbow men, thirty thousand javelin throwers and ten thousand seamen. To provide ample provisions for his armies, canal barges, supplemented by thousands of two-man wheelbarrows on the roads, transported huge quantities of cereals from the granaries on the Huang River to his base in the north. In addition, Yangdi ordered fifty thousand carts to carry uniforms, armor, and tents to the front.

By 7 February 612, a host of some 600,000 troops and civilians had assembled at Zhuojun. Sui armies crossed

the Liao River on pontoon bridges and had initial success, but suffered staggering losses at P'yŏngyang, the capital of Koguryŏ. Naval and marine forces under Admiral Lai Huer also suffered huge losses after initial victories. On 26 August, Yangdi disbanded his armies. Of the 305,000 troops that had crossed the Liao River only 2,700 returned. Despite the enormous loss, including enormous amounts of military equipment, Yangdi immediately began preparations for a second campaign.

On 28 January 613, Yangdi called for the mobilization of more troops to invade Koguryŏ. That announcement immediately sparked disaffection throughout the empire. The first in a series of rebellions broke out five days later, and a further fifteen uprisings erupted before the end of the year. Nevertheless, the emperor doggedly persisted in prosecuting the war, and his forces crossed the Liao River again on 21 May and besieged Ryotongsŏng. They used siege towers on eight wheels to shoot arrows over the city wall, finally scaling the walls on a ramp of earth-filled hemp bags.

All that effort was for naught. A revolt by the man in charge of the giant granaries at the end of the canal on the Huang River cut the supply line to the armies in Koguryŏ. In July, the rebel forces encamped at Luoyang and defeated the army sent to oppose them. When one of Yangdi's commanders defected to the Koreans, Yangdi had no choice but to disband the expeditionary army in the north. The rebellion was suppressed, the leader killed, and his corpse dismembered in the eastern market of Luoyang.

Undaunted by opposition to a third campaign against Koguryŏ, the emperor summoned more troops on 4 April 614, but many of the soldiers did not arrive in time due to rampant rebellions throughout the empire. The army in the north proved ineffectual again, but forces under Admiral Lai defeated the Korean army and besieged P'yŏngyang. On 7 September, Yŏngyang (reigned 590–618), the king of Koguryŏ, surrendered. Yangdi accepted the capitulation and disbanded his armies five days later.

The Korean king's surrender was a ploy to buy time. He ceded little territory and no powers over his subjects to his powerful neighbor. When Yŏngyang refused to visit Luoyang to pay homage to the emperor, Yangdi contemplated a fourth invasion of Koguryŏ, but nothing came of it. The emperor harvested only bitter fruit from his adventures in Korea. Rebellions increased in intensity and

ferocity year after year from the beginning of the campaigns until the end of his reign.

## Last Days

Rebellions by the Turks and the Chinese populace against Sui authority dominated the last days of Yangdi's reign. While on a tour of the northern frontier in June 615, Yangdi received word that the Qaghan Shibi (reigned 611–619) planned an attack on the emperor's entourage. Yangdi retreated to Yanmen, inside the Great Wall, but Shibi's warriors surrounded that city and besieged it for a month, until Sui reinforcements arrived. Yangdi then returned to his capital at Luoyang.

The humiliating confinement at Yanmen was another blow to Yangdi's prestige and authority over the populace. He refused to recognize the extent of the danger to him, however, and became increasingly incapable of dealing with the numerous insurrections proliferating within his realm. When rebel forces threatened Luoyang in 616, Yangdi decided to flee and abandon the north. He boarded his Dragon Barge and set sail for Jiangdu.

On the morning of 11 April 618, a body of his troops, many of them northerners who ardently desired to return home, stormed the Jiangdu palace and surrounded Yangdi. Aware of his impending doom, the emperor requested permission to take poison in an effort to save his dignity, but he was strangled with his own sash. Yangdi's death at the age of forty-nine brought a close to the Sui dynasty.

## Heritage

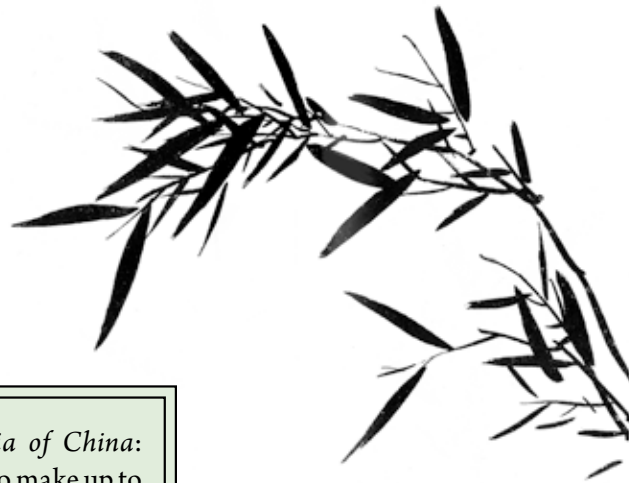
Traditional historians classified Yangdi as a "bad last ruler"; the indictment lodged against him by the captors on the day of his death contained many of the criteria for making such a judgment. He had abandoned the dynasty's ancestral shrines (the north), had pursued foreign wars that resulted in the death of many men (Koguryŏ), had spent too lavishly and extravagantly (Luoyang, palaces, the flotilla, and the northern tours), had destroyed the livelihood of his subjects (his enormous exaction of taxes and huge levies of corvée for public works), and had caused rebellions. While all of the charges were

true, they failed to acknowledge that some of his vast expenditures for projects (Luoyang and the Grand Canal) reaped great benefits for the empire. Furthermore, the hardships that he imposed on his people between 605 and 611 caused no serious disaffection among his subjects. In the end the colossal waste of men and resources on the Korean wars that yielded no tangible results brought him down and earned him the opprobrium of “bad last ruler.”

**Charles D. BENN**

## Further Reading

- Balazs, E. (1954). *Le traité juridique du “Souei-chou.”* Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill.
- Balazs, E. (1955). *Le traité économique du “Souei-chou.”* Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill.
- Bingham, W. (1941). *The Founding of the T’ang dynasty: The fall of Sui and rise of T’ang.* Baltimore: Waverly Press.
- Graff, D. (2002). *Medieval Chinese warfare, 300–900.* New York: Routledge.
- Heng Chye Kiang. (1999). *Cities of aristocrats and bureaucrats: The development of medieval Chinese cityscapes.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Needham, J., and Wang Ling. (1965). Mechanical engineering. In J. Needham (Ed.), *Science and civilisation in China: Vol. 4, Part 2. Physics and physical technology*, pp. 160–162 and 253. Cambridge, U.K.: University of Cambridge Press.
- Needham, J., Wang Ling, & Lu Gwei-djen. (1971). Civil engineering and nautics. In J. Needham (Ed.), *Science and civilisation in China: Vol. 4, Part 3. Physics and physical technology*, pp. 306–308. Cambridge, U.K.: University of Cambridge Press.
- Steinhardt, N. (1990). *Chinese imperial city planning.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Twitchett, D. (1963). *The financial administration under the T’ang dynasty.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, A. (1978). *The Sui dynasty.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Wright, A. (1979). The Sui dynasty. In D. Twitchett (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of China: Vol. 3. Sui and T’ang China, 589–906 (Part 1, pp. 48–149).* London: Cambridge University Press.
- Xiong, Victor. (1993). Sui Yangdi and the building of Sui-Tang Luoyang. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 52, 66–89.
- Xiong, Victor. (2006). *Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty.* Albany: State University Press of New York.



Share the *Encyclopedia of China*: Teachers are welcome to make up to 10 copies of no more than 3 articles for distribution in a single course or program. For further permissions, please visit [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). PDFs available from [www.berkshirepublishing.com](http://www.berkshirepublishing.com).

© Get Permissions